

[PDF] Close To The Machine: Technophilia And Its Discontents

Ellen Ullman - pdf download free book



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Description:

If there is such a thing as a typical computer programmer, Ellen Ullman is not it. She's female, a former communist, bisexual, old enough to be a twentysomething's mom, and not a nerd. She runs her own computer-consulting business in San Francisco and in *Close to the Machine* explores a world in which "the real world and its uses no longer matter." This memoir examines the relationship between human and machine, between material and cyberworlds and reminds us that the body and

soul exist before and after any machine. The wit Ullman brings to her National Public Radio commentaries shines through in the prose.

Review This gem of a book manages to simultaneously be an insider's look at the computer industry, a rollicking collection of bawdy tales, a serious look at the social impact of computing, a comic description of industry mores and, most importantly, a clear and honest account of a woman's response to her professional and personal environment.

Author Ellen Ullman, an independent computer programmer, holds little back in recounting her experiences. She discusses her business career, her approach to software and her sexual adventures, all with the same frank detachment. And she writes with a clarity, style and wit rarely seen, especially in the murky wilds of technojournalism. She is sure of what she knows, humble about what she doesn't, never pretentious, frequently hilarious and occasionally eloquent. The book is worth buying for the sheer pleasure of reading it. But it also has something to say.

Ullman's main theme is technology's alienating effect. In its programming context, "getting close to the machine" means working with low-level code. Here, where the commands make no intuitive sense but are pure strings of 1s and 0s, the programmer loses touch with the program's purpose. The operation of the system becomes paramount; the needs of the users are forgotten. Ullman develops this theme effectively in a series of personal glimpses of her growth during two decades as a professional programmer and of her loss of a sense of purpose to what she was doing--beyond getting a system to work.

That sounds grim, but Ullman, a great storyteller, makes it into a funny and almost touching account. She takes you inside the corporate offices where she negotiates her contracts and tells you who was there, how they dressed and how they comported themselves. She also has fun mimicking the thought process of programmers as expressed in cryptic speech.

A large portion of the book is devoted to her relationship with a younger man who was among a new generation of cypherpunks out to seize control of the system of computer networks she had helped build. From him she learned how her world of spreadsheets and useful applications was being displaced by a global network of goodies dispensed by the Internet.

She realized much of her knowledge was obsolete because she didn't know new Internet languages such as Java. Now the game was not making useful products, but tweaking the system to generate money through Internet commerce or content. Compared with the programs that Ullman had written, the new interfaces (browsers) had vastly simplified controls that made users into passive acquirers.

Ullman is unnerved by the man's casual approach to sex as well as software. As she writes, "His lovemaking was tantric, algorithmic. The sex was formulaic, had steps and positions and durations, all tried and perfected, like a martial arts kata or a well-debugged program. My own role in it was like a user-exit subroutine, an odd branch where anything might happen but from which we must return, tracing back to the mainline procedure."

In the end, unable to connect with him, she moves on: to the next job, the next computer language and presumably to the next lover. In revealing her private life so honestly, Ullman shows a great deal about how humans operate, how computers are made to operate and why computers can't be expected to make human decisions. She is, in fact, in the business of translating between one and the other--human desire and computer execution--her worm's-eye point of view puts things in perspective.

The computer, Ullman points out, "cannot simultaneously do something and withhold for later something that remains unknown." Only a human can do that. "The computer is not really like us. It is a projection of a very slim part of ourselves: that portion devoted to logic, order, rule and clarity."

As Ullman makes clear, she (like all of us) has more than logic, order, rule and clarity in her life, and this humanistic spirit infects her tales of tangled technology with a kind of subversive deadpan humor. *Close to the Machine* poses no problems, offers no solutions and urges no action. It offers a point of view--familiar yet somehow reassembled--described with a high degree of art. The book is sure to become a minor classic. -- *Upside, Cliff Barney*

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